

The Australian Family Association



Submission to the
Inquiry into palliative care

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Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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To the Committee:

Submission to the Inquiry into palliative care
From the Australian Family Association

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this timely inquiry.

The AFA takes a strong interest in issues concerning the dignity of the human person, and the rights of the most vulnerable members of society. We recognise the fundamental obligation of the healthy to provide care and comfort to sick and the dying, both in a private capacity, and through the public mechanisms of government. We affirm that the need for care at any stage of life is not undignified, but is rather a natural and inevitable part of life.

We submit, in agreement with Palliative Care Australia,¹ that attitudes towards death and dying in Australian society are permeated by a fear of end of life suffering and a lack of awareness and understanding of the benefits and opportunities for comfort which good palliative care can provide.

We further note that as Australia's population 'ages', Australian families face increasing challenges in understanding and meeting the needs of elderly family members who are approaching death.

We note that despite the widespread lack of community awareness of palliative care options in Australia, and the inevitable increase in the need for palliative care services in an aging

¹ Position statement by Palliative Care Australia on Voluntary Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, <http://www.palliativecare.org.au/Portals/46/PCA%20Voluntary%20Euthanasia%20and%20Physician%20Assisted%20Suicide%20Position%20Statement.pdf>.

population, those palliative care services which are available in Australia, though limited in quantity and by locality, are in fact among the best in the world.

In light of these observations we note the strong need for:

- greater community awareness of the possibilities and availability of palliative care
- improved access to currently available palliative care services
- more and better palliative care services to meet the needs of the Australian population.

In particular, we call for increased government support and funding for the following:

- Specialised medical and health education and training in palliative care to increase the number of specialists and services available to provide quality palliative care. This may include providing targeted incentives to encourage more medical and health professionals to seek a career in palliative care.
- Ongoing general medical and health education and training, to increase awareness among non-specialist medical and health professionals about the availability and capabilities of palliative care, and to thereby increase the likelihood that patients will be directed to quality palliative care where necessary.
- A mandatory minimum element of palliative care training in all tertiary medical education (and other relevant health professional education), since the vast majority of medical practitioners are likely to encounter high numbers of patients who require sound advice concerning the availability and capabilities of palliative care, either for themselves, or for family members.
- A targeted focus on improving palliative care access and availability in regional areas. Again, this may be achieved by the provision of targeted incentives.
- Community education focusing on the nature of palliative care, its capabilities, and its availability, and dispelling prevalent erroneous perceptions about the limitations of palliative care.
- Ongoing support services for families where a family member is receiving palliative care.

Respectfully yours,

Tim Cannon
for the Australian Family Association